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Of Predatory Publishers and Spurious Impact Factors

Saba Sohail

The history of Science is full of instances where a basically great idea or invention intended for good, got distorted and malpracticed. From the explosive for mining turning into a weapon of mass destruction, to potent analgesics turning into drugs of addiction, many scientific inventions originally meant for human betterment have shown the potential of a boon turning into a bane.

Publication and dissemination of scientific research is similarly fraught with the potential of corruption. To begin with, it was a moral or ethical corruption but now it has taken a monetary aspect as well. The ethical malpractice in scientific publication was used to be practiced predominantly by authors (with due apologies) submitting fraudulent/concocted or fabricated data, plagiarizing self or others work, data theft, or more subtle 'ethical crimes' as it seems, salami slicing a study of limited scope or submitting same study in multiple journals, or undue authorship credits or discredits. Sometimes it was on the part of editors or reviewer to copy good research or publish similar research of their own to get an early credit. The editor-publisher malpractice was used to be not taking care of adequate review to detect the above, slow processing, delaying the authors' progress up the career scales, or being biased for rejection or acceptance of scientific write ups unworthy of the given treatment, including the very controversial political embargo.

With the boom of the "publish or perish" dictum, however, a new sort of publishing malpractice is threatening to thrive due to corruption of two basically great services-electronic mails and open access journals. These had initially abolished the limitations of distances in communication and cost, with wide availability of research to distant readers with limited resources. But with currently low barriers on practicing this business, fraud has started to thrive. This author is but one of the increasingly high number of research writers and editors whose mailbox keeps cluttering with a misuse of both. These invitations are of many types, soliciting to join editorial boards, arranging conference sessions, delivering key note lectures in conferences, writing

books based on an article and most ridiculous of all, invitation for writing or presenting in a field completely alien to the field of study and specialization of the invited.

These journals are usually open access journals and seem to follow a policy of a low rejection rate, selection based only on a good idea put into practice and proved, in well written English, with acclaimed internationally credits and increased visibility of your work. Many new and even some old journals solicit authors to contribute to their journals and practice low selectivity without charging. This is not wrong in itself; what is wrong is to pretend to be a journal that is not in reality, and offer false rewards of credibility, impact factor and high visibility. So the question comes how to differentiate a predatory from a reliable journal?

A reliable scientific research journal has some common features: including permanent visibility - the published work will be permanently available; a genuine peer review - even with a low rejection rate; Editor and Editorial Board who acknowledge their association and work for the journal; encouraging scientific debates through publishing letters, criticisms and comments; and clear and transparent pricing (if requiring author to pay processing and publication fees). Most importantly, to be called a journal, it actually has to publish regularly be it web publishing. Absence of most of these features should deter an aspiring research writer to rush heedlessly into the process.

The famous Beall's list of predatory publishers includes OA journals publishing online only. Many would claim to actually printing hard copies attracting authors whose institutions require hard copies for proving claimed published work. Here are some signs that suggest a predatory tendency:

1. Addresses/contact information that do not match: mail sent from Maryland- journal location stated to be in France; contact number bearing Denmark country code - journal located in Australia, journal based at Switzerland- bankers located in another country; so on and so forth.
2. Indiscriminate invitations - management, computers, mathematics, zoology, physics and chemistry journals asking medical researchers to submit their research.
3. Journal publishing all disciplines at once from sciences to linguistics to parapsychology.

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4. Journals with high impact factors and long standing benchmark reputation actually inviting naïve/semi naïve authors from developing countries to submit their research.
5. Processing/publishing charges that seem extortionate for the given service and claimed to be justified on the pretext of expedient processing (with or without guaranteed acceptance), higher visibility with consequent higher citation and impact factor acquisition. In short, any thing that appeals to ego, costs money and defies reason and logic while being very tempting and easy.
6. Publishers copying the text of other publisher's articles with authorization or acknowledgement.
7. Using journal titles already in use by another legitimate and reputable journal to give an impression of a longer publishing history than they really do. Many such journals use the phrase "International Journal of ---", on the lines of some really reputable journals. However, the addresses given in the links of these spurious publishers mimicking the legitimate journal would be different from that given on the latters' website as found on independent searching.
8. Payment for access to a toll-access publisher, and each article listed has a "purchase" link, but none of the links actually leads to anything.
9. Publishers not taking care of plagiarism, language, syntax, typographical and archival format checking prior to publishing the article or monograph.
10. Repeated insistent invitation mails from the same group of publishers on multiple articles which do not quote or refer to other mails sent to the same author by a business or management representative, who often happens to be the same sender.
11. Newly launched journals claiming impact factor higher than the old reputable journals.
12. Journals claiming "universal" or "global" or "un-official" impact factors.

It is a natural desire on the part of researchers to go for international recognition and visibility for consequent rewards of higher citation and impact factor, and academic standing. To be cheated of that is what is deplorable and cautioned against. It is always advisable to check on a publishers' history and demography upon receiving such mails. Many of these publishing houses are statedly located in Asia, particularly in India and China, as well as The United States, though Africa and the UAE- based mails are also being received. Beall's list is one source of checking the authenticity. It should also be kept in mind that being visible on a search engine is not synonymous with being accredited. The claims of impact factor should also be counterchecked from the official Thompson- Reuter's website. So all in all it requires an acute mind with some common sense to identify these suspicious traits, before accepting such mails and wasting your valuable original research.

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